

USO dollar is a design dud in the eyes of some critics

By Roger Boye

Federal officials are using another "pre-issue sale" to promote their third and final commemorative coin program of 1991—a silver dollar honoring the 50th anniversary of the United Service Organizations.

The government is charging \$28 for a proof USO silver dollar ordered by July 26, \$3 less than the regular price. An uncirculated dollar costs \$23 now and \$26 starting in late July.

Similar pre-issue sales were held earlier this year for the Korean War commemorative silver dollar and the three-coin Mt. Rushmore program. So far, the U.S. Mint has sold more than half of the one million Korean coins it is authorized to make and about one-third of the 5.5 million Mt. Rushmore coins.

The latest dollar depicts a USO pennant and, on the tails side, an eagle perched on a globe. Several experts have said the trite images make the silver dollar look more like a wooden nickel or a cheap medal.

"The USO design is mediocre at best," said Charles Atherton, secretary to the Commission of Fine Arts. "It's something you'd expect to find [on a free token] in a cereal box."

The U.S. Mint had eight months to solicit designs, engrave dies and produce the first dollars. Officials asked just a few artists to submit designs because there wasn't time to seek drawings from a

large number of persons or to conduct an "open design competition" that anyone could enter.

Under the legislation, Uncle Sam can produce no more than one million USO silver dollars, with \$3.50 from each coin sale going to the USO for its programs, which assist U.S. military personnel and their families. To order a coin, call, toll free, (1-800) 872-4876, extension 223, or send a check to the United States Mint, 10001 Aerospace Drive, Lanham, Md. 20706. Allow several weeks for delivery.

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A coin-grading company has voided plans to place ancient coins in hard-plastic "slabs" because of widespread criticism from hobbyists.

The Numismatic Guaranty Corporation of America announced in early May that—for a fee—it would authenticate and grade ancient coins, and then encase them in clear plastic.

"We received an overwhelmingly negative response from collectors to our announcement," said Mark Salzberg, president of New Jersey-based NGC. "Ancient coin collectors like to hold and fondle their coins. They don't want them surrounded by plastic."

NGC, the hobby's second-largest "grading company," will continue to slab U.S. and many foreign coins. Such items usually are popular on the hobby market because collectors trust the coin to be as described on the plastic holder.